

An aerial photograph of a city street, likely in New York City, showing a large puddle that perfectly reflects the surrounding buildings and street. The scene is captured in a dark, moody light, possibly during dusk or dawn. The reflection is sharp and clear, creating a symmetrical image. The text is overlaid on the top left and bottom right of the image.

Isella Fracta

WILD AND VIOLENT

You had too much freedom

Stella Fracta
Wild and Violent. You
Had Too Much Freedom

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=73750663

ISBN 9785006964525

Аннотация

Homeless teenager Victor from the streets of New York accidentally finds himself in the home of a rich couple and finds a family. A drama about parent-child relationships, family secrets, and sick love, revealing the disgusting truth of the world of distorting mirrors from the perspective of a victim of emotional and sexual abuse. That very scandalous book from the series of works on the Fractured Star Universe, where young Victor from the novel The Unnamed Violin chooses freedom.

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Wild and Violent You Had Too Much Freedom

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ISBN 978-5-0069-6452-5

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

Disclaimer

This book is a work of fiction with fictional characters and a fictional plot. It contains descriptions of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that serve as a metaphor for the harm inflicted, often unconscious, and is told from the perspective of a victim under psychological influence. The author addresses the problem of violence, including child abuse, within a family, and through the forms of literary expression, reveals the horrific and disgusting aspects of what happens behind closed doors and is not brought to light.

The author doesn't give up hope that the book will finally be understood right: psychological abuse, manipulation, a narcissistic mother, and incest are bad; the underage victim, lost in a labyrinth of distorting mirrors, is unhappy and needs help.

Save Victor.

1. Station

Penn Station never sleeps, especially during rush hour. The bustling station boils like a scorching cauldron, and no one cares: whether one is trying to pull a shoelace out of a gap between the steps of an escalator, crying over the sight of a torn new suitcase, or stealing hot dogs from unwary tourists – no one pays any attention.

I looked around, in search of a likely candidate who wasn't keeping an eye on their property. When dusk falls in late autumn, people like me, being as if they are ever-restless squirrels, have no choice but to act decisively, casting aside the fear of being caught red-handed.

Better to get warm by running away without loot than to go hungry without even trying ... Otherwise, there'll be nothing to buy off the pesky local leaders with. Yesterday, I barely managed to fight off a gang that controls the nearby neighborhood, who assumed me occupying a space in a box in the back alleyway on West 43rd Street was 'illegal.' Just think of it, a cardboard box being illegal! But even homeless people have their own rules.

Being a tramp in Midtown, compared to everyone else, I could consider myself a trust fund baby – who can boast of living within walking distance of Times Square?

Here, on the streets, physical strength, endurance, and

authority play a decisive role ... I sometimes wondered how I, a skinny teenager, was still alive. Although the struggle for survival and natural selection have not been canceled.

The rat you don't eat today will happily and readily eat you tomorrow.

New Yorkers weren't prepared for the sudden change in weather conditions; the oncoming cold snap terrified me, too. I shuddered as I recalled the previous winter in the city: a corner of a dosshouse – albeit a stinking barracks – where it was warm helped me survive.

This time it was still necessary to find a place to live, and the time for the box had long passed.

But now was a different time – a moment when, with the speed of a cat being chased by a pack of dogs, I needed to snatch an expensive bag from some fashionista. The bag and phone would fetch a song from resellers, but the cash inside, like an Easter surprise – usually no more than the cost of a single taxi ride – could save me right away.

Everyone wants to eat. I wouldn't even turn down the half-eaten bun of a cheap burger from someone who's gluten-intolerant.

My stomach gave a drawn-out howl, echoing my gloomy thoughts. Scanning the crowd exiting the station building, I almost immediately chose my prey.

Well-well, a cashmere coat and a lynx fur collar, a beautiful face dreamily turned to her lanky companion ... A bag hanging

carelessly on her narrow shoulder, which she doesn't keep an eye on.

They chatter carefree about the trip they just finished, getting ready to go home, glancing towards the avenue to catch a car, and I just bite my lip, wrapping myself in an old hoodie – the only warm clothes I have – secretly, even from myself, envying such shameless individuals, bathing in blessings and joy.

An instant later, I was deftly maneuvering between the passers-by, following closely behind the couple, and now the woman's bag is in my hand: a wave of her perfume hits me, causing an inexplicable thrill, and the thin strap slides down, falling freely along her body.

At the very last moment, as I was about to disappear into the crowd of tourists who had just happened to be nearby, the loot twitched in my frozen fingers, pulling me back by its own momentum. I heard a shriek – so typical ... how sick I was of it! – and I tried with all my might to escape, even if the strap the woman had somehow managed to grab would break.

And so it happened. With a short but loud crack, the loop snapped, and I turned around for just a second, meeting the frightened gaze of the woman who had spotted the thief through the crowd.

I was already rushing along the sidewalk, crossing the roadway toward the park, stumbling on the stone steps, dashing without looking back. I was striving for safety, but contrary to usual, something went wrong.

I myself was seriously scared – either of the victim, who had suddenly acquired a personality and a beautiful face, or of the obstacles in her resistance.

And, what's more, I realized too late that I was being chased. That same guy – her companion – was now rushing after me, bumping into passers-by getting in his way, and she was only crying something after him, begging him not to do anything, lagging behind slightly.

Having passed the park and crossed the street, I ducked through a hole in the fence where the construction was underway. If there was no way through on the other side – the gate had been locked a couple of times – I'd get myself trapped! How could I have made such a mistake in my escape route, giving in to panic! I couldn't get enough air, and as soon as I slowed around the corner, naively assuming I'd managed to escape, the man in a black coat burst out from around the corner, knocking me off my feet.

He pounced on me and already had my throat in a death grip, and before I could come to my senses – I couldn't even break free – I was grabbing his hands on my neck at random; he seemed like an infernal shadow with burning eyes, trying to drag me into the underworld.

It occurred to me that, unfortunately, this would be my end: to be caught red-handed and shamefully strangled – by the punishing hand of an angry avenger.

“... Erik, stop!” the sound of a female voice reached me, as

if through a veil, very close. “Erik, you’ll strangle him!”

Multicolored flashes danced before my eyes, I could no longer comprehend anything, but the grip suddenly weakened, and my body fell helplessly onto the pavement.

I gasped for breath, wheezing and coughing, while they – the woman and the man – stared silently at me on my knees.

If only I could get up, if only I could find the strength to escape from here ... I need to run!

“Who taught you to steal from the street anyway?!”

“Leave him alone!”

“What do you mean, leave him alone? I’ll beat the life out of him so he never dares again!”

“No, please, no!” the woman begged him.

“He stole your bag!”

“To hell with that bag!”

The ill-fated bag, without the strap, lay on the pavement. It took me a while to get to my feet; forgetting the object I’d been trying to get myself to, I rushed forward, only to be abruptly tripped. Without letting me fall to the ground, the man shook me, turning me around by my raised wrists towards him, drilling me with his gaze.

His eyes were of unusual color – amber, like a cat’s, albeit with human round, dilated pupils.

“Look at me!” he barked, but for some reason I was looking past him, at the pale stranger trying to tear the man away from the pathetic thief. “If I see you again, I’ll kill you, you vile boy!”

There was something in his tone that made me believe him: he really would kill me.

I stood dumbly silent, blinking my eyelashes, wishing I could disappear into the ground. I want to leave!

“Erik, come on, let him go.”

He obeyed, and as soon as his gloved hands released me, I ran away headlong, not even looking where I was going.

No one was chasing me. After running three blocks, unable to bear the throbbing pain in my throat any longer, I stopped in a dimly lit section of the street and sank down onto the wet, cold pavement, sitting on my butt.

I hadn't cried in a long time – I thought I'd simply forgotten how to do so in the uninhabitable conditions I'd been living in for so many years – but my body was shaking, either from the cold or from silent sobs.

Perhaps the only thing left for me to do today was lie down.
In the box.

2. Handcuffs

When winter descends on the city, New Yorkers rejoice in the fresh snow and the approaching Christmas festivities. For those living on the streets, things are a little different.

Of course, the stream of onlookers doesn't disappear, and warmly dressed passers-by still lose bags, give change to beggars, and throw their perfectly usable junk in the trash, but getting all of the above is becoming much more difficult.

Not because a hobo's frozen hands don't obey him as he rummages through garbage and stumbles across broken bottles, but because with the onset of cold weather, he has to force himself to move more often and constantly search for something to eat. Physiology demands more resources for survival.

Otherwise, one will simply freeze to death, or be robbed by their fellow sufferers. I never encountered the solidarity among the homeless that I'd heard about on the streets of Manhattan – only competition.

It was warm inside the station building – I even felt drowsy as I leaned against a column in the cash machine corner, watching for patrol movements. I was taking a risk, as I always did.

Snatching the clutch from an elderly woman was easy; she immediately started wailing, but I was already far away – heading for the hall's exit through the winding corridors, not at all afraid of being followed. I'd pulled this trick many times before, and

the patrol at the opposite end of the hall posed no threat.

I turned around out of habit as I crossed the street, and to my great surprise, I caught the gaze of the stranger – the same one whose husband had shaken me like a rag doll in the back alleyway yesterday. She was a few feet away – a good distance for me to lose a tail – but clearly ready to follow me.

A wave of panic washed over me again. Just like last time, I foolishly chose the wrong direction: once I crossed the park, which was awash with multicolored lights even during the day, I had no other escape route except the hole in the fence.

“Stop!” I heard the voice behind me, very close now, but I only sped up.

Who do you think would stop if someone shouted something like that at them, clearly with bad intentions?

What does she want from me? I didn’t even take her bag yesterday; I’m running off with someone else’s loot! Does she really want a rematch? What if her yellow-eyed husband is lurking around the corner?!

But I had no choice. Almost crashing into the fence, I squeezed between the metal sheets, once again grateful for my slight frame.

“Stop right there! I won’t do anything to you!”

No way! The damn woman, following my example, slipped through the hole in the fence a couple of seconds later, and under any other circumstances, I would have commended her for her agility.

Whether it was because I was running out of strength or just by chance, she managed to catch up with me before I reached the other side of the fence. I felt strong hands grab me sharply by the shoulders from behind, and even with the slight weight of the stranger's body, I lost my balance.

We collapsed onto the pavement, but I immediately perked up – the clutch forgotten – breaking free and rising from my knees. As luck would have it, she reacted quickly too, and her fingers clamped down on my wrist again – so tightly and painfully that I couldn't help but hiss.

Gasping for air, we stared at each other for a few moments, like bristling cats, arching our backs and dividing territory; then I flinched, but she showed no sign of being embarrassed, extending her other hand and intending to hold me back.

At that moment, I didn't think clearly – I was all about instinct. Was I being cornered, trapped? That meant I had to defend myself.

The makeshift knife, stolen from a hobo for self-defense, came in handy. Ducking down and dodging her grasp, I thrust the blade forward.

The woman knocked it out of my hand before I could even gasp.

“What are you doing?!” she exclaimed, holding my shaking body by the forearms and looking into my eyes.

She was indignant. And she was as scared as I was.

And she was also very beautiful – like the girls on the

advertising signs; only too pale to arouse the interest of lovers of luscious and tanned beauties.

“What do you want from me?!” I shrieked, realizing she wouldn’t let me go.

For some reason, I couldn’t stand her closeness, and her spicy perfume irritated my receptors more than I could bear.

“I want to help you!”

“I don’t need any help!” I croaked in response, still trying to break free.

Is she crazy?!

“Stop twitching, calm down,” she said, her voice much quieter, but her trustful tone only irritated me.

She’s clearly up to something – just grabbing a homeless boy, holding him by force, not even being squeamish ... There’s clearly something wrong with her.

Most likely, she is one of those perverts who take homeless people in their luxury cars to a distant hole, where they, already ready to do anything for food or a fix, are raped, dismembered, and something else like that.

Not a chance, I don’t want to end up like this. I’m definitely not buying it!

The adrenaline in my blood was off the charts – both from the sheer brutality of the situation and from the fear of the torture that lay ahead: for some reason, I quickly believed my assumptions ... I kicked her in the knee: all representatives of the human race are alike – all have the same vulnerabilities. The

woman coughed hoarsely, momentarily loosening her grip, and it only took me a second to push her away and run in the opposite direction.

“You little—!” she blurted out, and I, in turn, was ready to scream at the top of my lungs in panic.

I took literally two steps before something cold and metallic snapped around my left wrist, caught in the grip of her palms.

Handcuffs ...!

I jerked again, dragging the woman behind me, leaning against the pavement, chained to me with cuffs, and then, powerless, I fell to my knees.

“Let go!” I howled.

“Don’t be afraid of me!”

“I’m not going anywhere!”

“No one will hurt you!”

Maybe she’s from the police or social services? But cops don’t care about hobos! What do I do, what do I—

She tried to lift me off my backside, holding me under my arms, but I resisted her every move, kicking violently: as soon as her patience ran out, she would let go of me. She would get tired of messing with me, and she would leave me sitting here.

“Why are you so stubborn?” she grumbled in my ear, and I dodged her hands, squeezing my eyes shut, trying not to breathe, so as not to smell her clean, fragrant body again, not to feel the soft fabric of her short coat. “Get up!”

She pulled my left hand upward, and the steel ring of the

handcuffs cut into my wrist, but I kept resisting, pulling us both to the ground.

I tried not to burst into tears, but inside I was seething with rage mixed with dread. Why does this happen to me?!

The stranger dragged me for several yards, and I feigned limpness, a broken toy, gritting my teeth in pain. Then she stopped, carefully walking around me – surprisingly, without twisting my aching limb – and leaning toward my face.

“I won’t hurt you! Come with me, I’ll explain everything.”

“No!”

“Get up!”

“Screw you!” I muttered.

But for some reason, I was already leaning forward, drawn by her embrace, rising to my feet.

And then I trudged in the direction her hands were pushing me.

“Come on, you have nothing to lose,” the stranger encouraged me gently, and although her face retained a concentrated expression, I heard a smile in her voice.

I didn’t believe her – not a single word. But I really had no choice. I was handcuffed to my tormentor – I couldn’t kill her, really ...

What if—? No, no, I don’t want more blood on my hands – there have been enough unpleasant incidents already.

Well, yeah, I thought mirthlessly. I’ll have to bite off my wrist to get rid of the handcuffs. Or break my hand – then I’ll be able

to pull my fingers through the ring.

When we got out onto the busy street through the unlocked gate, I no longer attempted to escape. I remained vigilant, watching every second for the right moment, adopting the strategy of a lurking hunter.

Or a mouse cannot be a hunter if a cunning cat is about to grab its tail with a sharp claw, can it?

The woman was looking at me strangely, and in her dark eyes I could see my reflection: a skinny, long-nosed boy in a greasy hoodie, a pale, pointed face with dirty hair falling over his forehead. I couldn't hold the gaze on myself for so long without looking away.

Undeterred by the way passers-by began to glance at us, out of breath and disheveled – a hobo handcuffed to a pretty young woman in expensive clothes would raise questions, although perhaps from a distance it looked like we were holding hands? – the stranger led me to the dark blue off-roader.

“Get in the car,” she ordered me in a tone that brooked no argument, and I obeyed.

Well, she'll dismember me after all.

3. Don't Lie

In the cabin, it was warm: the engine had probably been running the entire time, and the heater was on. We sat side by side on the rear seat, and I stared at the back of the seat in front of me, avoiding her gaze.

For some reason, I suddenly became completely indifferent to what she intended to do with me next.

“If you behave calmly, I will remove the handcuffs,” she stated, trying to make eye contact with me.

I silently shrugged one shoulder – the other was aching terribly – and put my head even lower so that it wouldn't be clear from under my bangs where I was looking.

Perhaps I would have sat like that for eternity if it weren't for her voice, which pulled me out of the enveloping half-sleep, “If you let me help you, we'll both be better off.”

“I don't need *your* help,” I couldn't hold back from saying.

“So you think you're okay?”

There was both indignation and a barely perceptible tremor in the soft timbre.

“Why do you need all this? Let me go.”

“And why do you need this? Do you enjoy freezing on the streets and hanging around train stations, risking your life for a couple of bucks?”

“Not a couple – more,” I chuckled.

“When was the last time you ate something hot? Do you have anything warmer than this hoodie?”

Her hand, cuffed to mine, jerked involuntarily on the seat in a gesture of annoyance, and I winced at the stinging pain; my reaction did not go unnoticed.

“What’s it to you?!” I said rudely, lifting my chin and tossing my hair back from my face with a flick of my head. “Don’t you have anyone else to keep an eye on? Find another hobo!”

“I don’t care about others.”

“There’s nothing special about me. You’re up to something – I’m not going to play your games.”

“You have no other choice,” she said with a deliberately indifferent chuckle.

But I felt uneasy.

I need her to undo the handcuffs – so I can get out of the car and run away.

“Remove the cuffs, I can’t talk like this,” I breathed out peacefully.

“Otherwise you’ll run away ...”

“I won’t, I promise.”

I was bluffing, but people usually believed me. I hoped she would believe me too ... To be sure, I widened my eyes, looking at her with a pleading expression.

My little skit about the poor, unfortunate boy worked – the metal ring clicked open. Not on my wrist, but on the wrist of the stranger.

However, it was enough for me to lose the ballast. At that very moment, I pushed the door at the right, intending to escape from the cabin.

The woman managed to grab me by the hips and drag me back into the car, catching me by the arms. A second later, the door slammed shut like a trap that had caught a wolf's paw, and I howled like a wild animal – the stranger had cuffed me again.

Only now it was to the right ceiling handle – so that my limb was raised up, crosswise with my body turned in the opposite direction.

“Bitch!” I blurted out, and none of us could tell if it was directed at the stranger or into the void.

She, completely unfazed by my wild appearance, grabbed my chin, immobilizing my free hand with the now-familiar grip on the wrist, forcing me to look directly at her over my shoulder. I tried to pull away, but to no avail – her cold fingers, burning my skin, held me tightly and uncompromisingly.

Her face was too close, and I didn't even dare lick my dry lips.

The spacious car suddenly felt cramped and stuffy.

“What's your name?” she demanded.

“Leo,” I lied.

The woman snorted.

“Don't lie!”

I was taken aback, blinking. She can't know – she's—

“Well, go ahead!”

“But what's it to you?!”

“Your name isn’t Leo. Then what’s your name?”

“Victor,” I said after a pause.

What’s the point of hiding it ...? However, the stranger did not let go of my chin, as I expected – she continued to look at me with that strange gaze.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t lie,” she countered, more calmly, and I flinched, pulling back suspiciously, held back only by her tenacious fingers digging into my sunken cheeks.

So she can accuse me of lying for any phrase – she can’t know anything about me ...!

“Okay, fourteen,” I exhaled loudly through my nose.

“Where do you live?”

“In the dosshouse on the Bowery,” I lied again, but in such a way that anyone would believe me.

For some reason, she just shook her head, loosening her hand a little, but kept touching my face.

“Where are your parents?”

“I’m already an adult, I don’t need parents!”

“I get it,” she muttered.

“What is it, what you get?!” I suddenly got furious. “Don’t you dare judge me, you petty blind sheeple, you know nothing about me! She gets it!”

“Easy ...”

“Who the hell are you, to detain me like this?! Who are you

to catch me like this – like a stray dog, with cuffs, by force! Who do you think you are – you stupid bitch! Or are you trying to play around with charity? Shove your pity up your vagina!”

As soon as her hand on my right wrist relaxed – from the surprise of my tirade, I suppose – I immediately threw the door open again, almost completely out of my mind, sincerely convinced that the harder I pulled, the more likely it would be to break the ceiling handle.

I was about to break my arm – if I hadn’t already – and as I jerked and struggled unsuccessfully to get out of the car, I felt that damn woman dragging me back.

Having already unfastened the handcuffs somehow, he manages to drag me in with difficulty.

I scratched my cheek on the sparkling rings on her ring finger, I bit her wrist, which was near my mouth, and only then did I realize it ... I was screaming something incoherent and senseless, and she tried to shut me up, pressing me down into the seat with the weight of her body.

She didn’t say a word, she waited until I stopped shaking, and only after I had fallen limp beneath her, lying face down with my nose on the back seat sofa, did the stranger turn to me, still stirring my nerves with her warm breath tickling my neck.

“Defending your freedom? Saying I have no right to detain you? You had *too much freedom* – and how did you use it? Are you happy?”

I huffed angrily, but said nothing out loud.

“Answer me, Victor, are you happy with your freedom?”

4. Freedom

What kind of question is that? I didn't choose freedom.

It all just happened: first the orphanage, then the escape – better to run than endure abuse – then the streets ... I've been living like this for three years now! What choice did I have?

At that moment, I tried to pretend that her question didn't bother me at all, but deep down, a worry settled: what if she's right?

“Better this than being a slave to the system and living through rose-colored glasses in a consumer society!” I muttered to the seat.

“Are you talking about me or something?”

Did I imagine it, or did she laugh? She's definitely touched in the head.

As if suddenly remembering herself, she raised herself up on her hands, freeing me from underneath her, and took a seat next to me. I cautiously turned and sat upright, glancing warily at the cuffs hanging from the ceiling handle.

“Why do you need all this?” I finally asked hoarsely.

“I already told you – I want to help you.”

“What good will that do? You'll help me if you just let me go and never come after me again.”

“That won't work for me.”

I couldn't remember how much time had passed since she

chased me at the station, but her beautiful face seemed familiar. How curiously my brain works.

It suddenly dawned on me.

“I got it,” my lips curled into a smirk. “You want to work your guilt trip on me! For *me*,” I emphasized the word deliberately, mimicking her confident tone, “that won’t work.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It couldn’t be simpler,” I retorted, hardly feeling confident, reigniting the conflict but wanting to expose the woman. “Better feed the birds or save the Bengal tigers – I have nothing to do with it. Don’t waste your time and energy – it won’t work.”

She looked at me carefully, and for the first time in many months I discerned not the usual disgust and disdain, but interest.

I was afraid to believe that she saw me as more than just a homeless kid stealing bags.

“You’re right about one thing: by letting yourself be helped, you’ll help me,” she said.

“You’re in the wrong place.”

“You’re not listening to me – it’s you I need.”

“You don’t know me at all.”

Indeed – I could be dangerous; I could, after all, do something to her – anything – from robbery to rape ...!

“So let me get to know you.”

“You’re crazy,” I sighed resignedly, lowering my head, burying my face in my hair. “For the last time, I beg you – let me go.”

Until the very end, I resisted the growing urge to simply give in and let this freak do whatever she wanted. How bad could her conditions be – what if I, too, found pleasure in various perversions?

Maybe she'll just ask me to urinate on her – I've already been offered pedophilic sodomy once ... I, of course, refused – I ran away at the first opportunity – but now it's a different matter.

My imagination was already running wild, and I caught myself thinking that, firstly, judging by everything, her proposal would have nothing in common with what I had pictured in my mind, and, secondly, for some reason this upset me.

"I'll find you a home, you'll be safe," she began.

I shook my head in protest, "Don't bother – I'm all right as I am."

"I can buy you clothes."

"I'm fine for now," I shrugged.

I lied, but a pair of holey summer sneakers and an old hoodie aren't rock bottom.

"I'll give you money," the stranger said with sadness in her voice.

What if I really did agree, nod, just take the cash and leave? Of course, I had no idea how much she could give a hobo, and I've never been good at saving anyway ...

Wait! Can I *just take* her money?

I wouldn't mind earning it – but I didn't know how – or stealing it, but taking it seemed somehow *unfair*. Because there's no point

in her giving me money voluntarily ... and I'm not a beggar.

Once upon a time, everything could have been different. Once, I couldn't even imagine that I would be parasitizing on people like her.

"So where do we stand?" The woman in front of me pulled me out of my thoughts, staring intently at my face.

Come on, agree, agree! my inner voice kept repeating. I wanted to leave, but at the same time, I wanted to stay. What's wrong with me?

Take the money and go! Like on TV – take the money and go.

"And you'll leave me alone?"

How naive I looked at that moment! I was trying to fool her, but she might as well have fooled me!

I can't trust anyone ... Not even myself.

"Yes. If you take the money."

"Deal," I exhaled with feigned relief, watching her put her hands into the pockets of her soft, thin coat and pull out first a couple of bills, then a wad of a few more.

"Wait, just a moment ..."

"Enough. That's enough," I said, for some reason, embarrassed.

I looked into her eyes, confused, and all my resolve vanished, leaving no trace. Where is the catch, where is it?

She thrust the money into my hands. Her palms trembled slightly – I felt it in the quick touch.

As soon as I realized it was time to leave, I swung the

door open, awkwardly stumbling out onto the roadway, choosing a moment of increased traffic on the road.

So that, having chased after me, she would not have time to cross the street, waiting for the flow of cars to die down, and I would be able to get away.

Giving in to a fleeting desire to do some last shit, out of the corner of my eye seeing the woman standing next to the car on the opposite side of the road, I demonstratively extended my hand forward, and white and green pieces of paper flew out of my open hand one after another.

I immediately regretted my actions, but the little bastard inside me triumphed.

I don't care that I risk going hungry again today if I don't find something to eat ...

Well, it was stupid, though. I shouldn't have done it. I shouldn't have.

5. I Want to Be Alone

Naturally, I returned to the spot a couple of hours later, having first made sure the stranger had vanished without a trace. I was lucky: one bill, unnoticed by passers-by and not caught in the wind, remained in the flowerbed among the branches of a frozen cypress.

I bought a huge burrito with it, and still had a ton of change left over. I certainly couldn't finish the entire tortilla with all the filling, but I was incredibly greedy and hungry in front of the street food window.

And so, by the middle of the meal, I was already having trouble working my jaws, but I still shoved the food down. Just in case – who knows what might happen to me tomorrow?

It didn't bother me that the bench in the park between West 33rd and 34th Streets – the very same one I run through time and again, getting myself in trouble – was cold and unsuitable for sitting. I sank contentedly into my inner silence – free of unnecessary thoughts and worries – mindlessly gazing at the multicolored garlands of holiday lights ahead and above me.

The burrito had already cooled, and my body began to feel the chill again: that's how I realized it was evening. The hood pulled over my head didn't provide any warmth, it merely obscured my vision.

It was probably because of it that I only saw someone sit down

on the bench to my left at the very last moment.

That someone was the stranger.

“My other offers still stand,” she said peacefully.

I remained silent and chewed my tortilla, glancing sideways at the woman in the gray coat.

Maybe if I pretended not to notice her, she’d go away ...? I unwittingly hunched my shoulders, wishing I could become invisible.

“Look at it this way. There’s probably something you *truly* want.”

“I want you to leave.”

Did I even say that out loud?

She sighed, but moved closer. I caught the scent of her perfume – for these past few hours, the memory of her had occasionally troubled me. I myself seemed saturated with perfume, with memories, and now I constantly felt her subtle presence.

How could I get rid of her? She no longer angered me, but her company didn’t bring me any joy either.

“What should I do to make you leave me alone?” I turned my head towards her, throwing back my hood. “You didn’t even let me eat in peace.”

“Sorry,” the stranger replied.

She said it without any pretense. Wow!

“I want to be alone,” I muttered through clenched teeth.

Or rather, not alone – I’ve always been alone – but free from

strangers' intrusive attention. I thought I wasn't risking anything: whether she'd be offended or upset – I couldn't care less. The main thing was to make sure she didn't come here again – to the train station, the park, the construction site; otherwise, if she left today, she'd be ambushing me again tomorrow.

“I already told you – I don't need anything. Thanks for lunch – but that's all.”

“You're cold.”

There was no question in her tone – it was an assertion, a statement of fact. I didn't want to agree with her, even though I was visibly shaking all over, and the paper around the half-eaten tortilla was fluttering, not from the wind.

“Not at all,” I stubbornly objected.

I saw her roll her eyes and then wrap herself in the coat tighter, crossing her arms over the chest. She wasn't wearing gloves, and in fact, she wasn't dressed for the weather today: yesterday's lynx coat and gloves were far more appropriate for early winter.

“Well, I'm cold. I can't imagine spending the whole day outside in this weather,” she said gloomily, and I didn't hear any mockery or boasting in her words.

Maybe I just didn't want to hear it ...?

“Let's go, okay? Finish your taco burrito – or whatever you have – in the car, and I'll buy you some hot coffee?” she offered amiably.

But I interrupted her, “No need. I don't need anything. Just go. Or I'll go myself.”

“Victor ...”

The sound of my name in her voice literally turned everything inside me upside down. My heart suddenly felt like it was about to jump out of my chest, and, even more terrified of such a reaction, I scowled like a hedgehog.

“It won’t work.”

“Victor,” she called again, but I didn’t dare look at her – I was staring at the pavement beneath my feet.

Then I jumped to my feet, gasping for icy air.

“Will you quit it?!” I snapped at her, and she just widened her dark eyes. “I’m telling you for the last time: go away, leave me alone, or I’ll leave myself! And don’t you dare follow me!”

We were starting to attract attention again – my indignant cries had already drawn several onlookers – and, thoroughly annoyed, I threw the rest of my burrito in the trash.

Screw it, I wouldn’t have taken it with me anyway.

“Are you happy? I’m leaving! I can’t say it was nice meeting you,” I bowed clownishly, my gaze flashing angrily, noting how her beautiful face was turning pale.

What’s wrong with her?!

“Wait! Stop!” she blurted, but I had already turned on my heels, striding away.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized she wasn’t following.

I won!

6. Dead End

I had no more than half a mile to go down 8th Avenue, but out of habit, I took a circuitous route rather than a direct one. After passing the parking lot, I found myself in the backyard, already imagining myself curled up in the fetal position in my corner and falling into a cold, dreamless oblivion.

But my plans were not destined to come true – in one of the back alleyways on the final stretch of the route, I was surrounded by those same thugs, unhappy with my presence on their territory.

Having driven me into a dead-end street of trash bins with a chain-link fence on the opposite side, which was impossible to get over – I tried, and once, in that very same place, I was beaten unconscious by random gangsters who simply didn't like me – they were already mocking me with all their might, anticipating the pleasure of someone else's humiliation.

“Hey, weakling! Where's your mommy?” one of them mumbled nasal. “It's a shame she won't see you now, giving head!”

They were cackling, there were four of them, and I just backed toward the chain-link fence, looking around uselessly for a way out.

There was no way out.

I wish I had that makeshift knife right now ...!

“You shouldn’t have been showing off – it wouldn’t have hurt so much! Two dicks in the ass isn’t as four at once! Just look at him – he’s gone completely white!” they laughed. “All the blood went where it needed to go!”

My butt really did clench in terror; when I felt the fence at my back, I was ready to scream – out of despair. Every time I found myself in a situation where the opposing group was physically superior, I could not come to terms with the universal injustice.

“The main thing is, don’t struggle – or you’ll kick it from the strain, and fucking a corpse isn’t our thing!” one of them spat, coming closer.

He wanted to punch me in the face, but I managed to dodge it, blocking it. I couldn’t parry the second blow – his two other accomplices grabbed my arms, giving him room to get creative.

Then he hit me in the stomach with all his might, knocking the air out of my lungs, and I began to slide down the fence to the ground with a wheeze.

They lifted me up – just as roughly, to stop me from struggling – but I was no longer able to do anything. I didn’t count the blows, couldn’t tell if it was the same one hitting me or each one in turn.

As I lay on the pavement by the fence, having lost my balance yet again, someone’s boot kicked me in the ribs. I hoped that would be the end of it ... Oh, how naive I was.

Buckles jingled and clothes rustled.

“Okay, kiddo, now take your pants down.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Rough hands shook me, lifting me by my hair, pushing my face into the fence, turning my back to my tormentors. The jeans were several sizes too big – they pulled them off without any effort.

I choked on silent cries, clutching the fence with numb fingers, mentally praying for this whole nightmare to end quickly.

I'd never been fucked in the ass before – and, like a fool, I naively believed that such a thing would never happen to me.

How wrong I was ...

Suddenly their mocking laughter died down, and even the one who had pinned me against the fence, before he could even begin his evil deed, turned around.

I just pressed myself against the fence, with my eyes tightly closed, hearing strange squeals and wheezing, the sounds of falling bodies.

“What the heck?!” the thug standing behind me boomed, letting me go. “Who the hell are you?”

There was no answer – I only made out the momentary sounds of a struggle behind me, and a similar gurgling sound of a cut throat followed by the sound of a fallen body.

I found the strength to shake off my stupor, overturning and sliding down the fence, no longer clinging to the wire mesh. With my pants down, I sat down on my butt, gasping for breath from shock and pain.

The woman in the soft gray coat, stained with fresh blood, stood opposite me, looking down at me. Her dark eyes glistened

in her pale face, and she looked more like a she-devil than a spoiled New York fashionista.

“I was just about to give you a few tips on self-defense,” she cleared her throat, smiling unnaturally.

I moved my lips, but couldn't immediately say, “Did you—”

She threw something that looked like the knife I had threatened her with in the afternoon onto the ground next to the body of my attacker with his fly unzipped.

“It was long overdue. Pricks. Those two are definitely still alive, but if one doesn't call a doctor, they'll kick it in a couple of hours.”

“How did you—”

“How did I find you? How did I manage to deal with them?” She got even closer, leaning towards me, and I instinctively recoiled, pressing myself against the fence. “Don't think about it. Don't think about anything.”

I suddenly burst into tears. Bitterly, without embarrassment. I smeared salty tears and blood across my face, swallowing metallic-tasting saliva, and howled at the top of my lungs.

I felt her stroking my hair, lifting me by the shoulders, but seeing my unwillingness to get up, she allowed me to sit back down onto the pavement.

I cried, both from hurt and relief, and simply because it was allowed to cry.

“Everything will be okay,” I heard the gentle voice at my temple. “Listen to me, everything is okay. You're not alone.”

You're not alone."

I grabbed her coat with my fingers, not realizing why I was pulling her down, and the woman was forced to kneel next to me to keep her balance.

As soon as my sobs stopped being so frequent, she carefully removed her fingers from my head and ran her palms over my shoulders, going lower to my waist.

"Come on, don't sit around without pants – you'll catch a cold."

I came to my senses, half-conscious, and couldn't immediately figure out what to do. Pants? What pants?

But the stranger was already lifting me up, supporting me under the arms, and I, pushing my feet into the ground, not without effort, stood upright.

She quickly put the missing piece of clothing back on me, and I didn't even bother to help her. I had no time for embarrassment at that moment.

"Can you walk?" she asked, looking into my eyes.

I wasn't sure, but I nodded.

"Hold on to me," she commanded, taking my arm, but her gaze immediately returned to my face. "Hey, just don't pass out."

I nodded again, feeling nausea rising in my throat: the smell of fresh blood, the near-rape, the pain from the hematomas that had surged with renewed intensity ...

"Victor, if you're going to throw up, you better warn me—"

But I couldn't get a word out: my stomach had decided to push

out all its contents. Barely having time to turn to the right, I, supported by the stranger, bent over and vomited onto the pavement, while she carefully brushed my hair away from my face, which was covered in cold sweat.

Surprisingly, I got better quickly, and straightening up, I leaned my back against the ill-fated fence, closing my eyes for a few seconds.

I was about to start demanding that she leave me alone again, but I changed my mind. For some reason, I didn't want to part with her. Not yet.

"I'm sorry about your coat," I muttered hoarsely, opening one eye.

She chuckled, dabbing my face with a napkin. I grabbed her hand, continuing to do the same, but this time on my own.

"Well, yeah, its designer couldn't have imagined something like that."

Soon the napkin had turned into a shapeless, scarlet lump, and I tossed it into the far corner.

"We have to go. I have ice in the car. And more napkins," the woman smiled faintly, gently touching my elbow.

It was excruciatingly painful for me to move, but I tried not to show it.

7. Thank You

Again the streets, again the stares of uncomprehending passers-by, hurrying about their business in the deepening dusk and city lights – her car was within walking distance.

She was following me after all!

When we reached the car, I silently climbed inside and lay down on my side on the back seat sofa, taking the least painful position.

Even if I didn't have broken ribs, I was pretty bruised.

The stranger sat in the driver's seat, rummaging through the first aid kit, the engine running and purring pleasantly in my ear.

“Apply cold. To your face and wherever else it hurts.”

“It's alright,” I said hoarsely, not moving.

She sighed, leaning over the back of the seat, finding herself waist-deep in the gap between the chairs.

“Don't act brave in front of me. Take it, please.”

I took two hypothermic packs from her hands. One went straight to my cheekbone.

“Did I understand correctly – the right side?”

I had no choice but to nod, hiding under the corner of the cold pack.

“Just lie down on it. Can you do it?”

“Uh-huh.”

Huffing with concentration, I stuffed the cold under my

side, casually adjusting my hoodie and T-shirt over my sunken stomach.

I realized that my previous bruises, which had not yet healed but no longer caused discomfort, had become a source of concern for the stranger.

“If I suggest going to a doctor, you certainly won’t agree, will you?” she asked, biting her lip.

“I won’t. It’ll pass quickly. Everything’s fine.”

I really wasn’t worried. Maybe just a little ... And that’s because I’d taken up her anxiety.

“I’ll take you to my place,” she informed me.

“No.”

“Pardon me, but I’m not asking you now,” the woman said, returning to the usual position in the seat.

“I’ll run away,” I responded halfheartedly.

“Of course,” she sighed, turning around. “Just get better first.”

“I’m fine!” I flared stubbornly, raising my head and glaring at her. “Don’t start this conversation. It’s pointless. Or I’ll think you staged this on purpose to get me into your car.”

She had no answer to that – she looked at me, bewildered, for a few seconds, and then turned away.

“Excuse you!” the stranger snorted.

“You’re probably expecting words of gratitude from me—”

“I’m not – I didn’t do it for your ‘thank you,’” she shrugged, completely naturally, as if it were for a hankie or a cigarette.

“Thank you.”

She turned her head in my direction, looking at me with that strange gaze, and smiled.

I couldn't help but smile back.

My jaw immediately hurt, but I barely noticed.

"I'm offering you a deal. You live with me for a week – do whatever you want, use whatever you want, no one will chain you to a radiator. And if you don't like it, if you want to leave – you go back to your gangsters."

I blinked silently, unable to believe my ears, and my first thought was an absolute refusal. How could this be? I wasn't planning on going to someone's apartment, especially since—

"Does your husband know what you're doing?" I suddenly quipped.

Her yellow-eyed strangler, by the way, promised to finish me off.

"No. But he'll understand. I'll explain everything to him."

"I somehow doubt it ..."

"Don't doubt it," she assured me, looking ahead through the windshield. "You'll even become friends, you'll see."

"Pfft! I have no desire to make an appearance – much less be friends."

She turned to face me again.

"So where do we stand?"

Two forces warred within me: one, perpetually paranoid and distrustful, muttered that no one – especially her, this beautiful stranger – could be trusted; the other, either wanting to finally fall

asleep in a warm place or, despite everything, believed in human kindness. I had to choose which side to listen to – my life depended on it.

“I promise you,” the woman said softly, “if you agree, no one will restrict you. If you want freedom, go ahead ... Just come back for the night.”

My side – and even my cheek – started to sting from the cold, and I dropped the bag onto the seat, propping myself up on my elbow and pulling out the other I’d been hiding under my clothes.

Before answering, I sighed heavily.

“I agree,” I said, as if I were diving headfirst into a pool.

Maybe that’s true – but until I start, I’ll never know.

8. It Has to Be

We pulled into the Brooklyn Bridge interchange, and I, having recovered somewhat, sat up straight, my head slightly tilted back on the seat's headrest.

“Ugh, Brooklyn,” I said. “I thought you lived somewhere in Soho.”

I hoped she'd realize I was just making a goofy joke, and when I caught her gaze in the rearview mirror, I curled my lips into a semblance of a smile.

It didn't work out very well, but she giggled, probably out of sympathy.

“We moved from the East Village not long ago. It's certainly the busiest place, but Bed-Stuy is more spacious. Much more spacious,” she emphasized the last sentence, glancing at me through the mirror again.

I had nothing to say in response – I was going with the flow, distracted by the colorful lights of the city's nighttime signs. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been a detached, independent observer, simply carefree as I moved through the streets in the car.

Perhaps, I'd never been at all.

The stranger drove confidently, not bothering me with conversation, and for some reason I wished this weird ride would last forever.

So simple – calm, warm, safe.

For the first time in a long time, I caught this almost forgotten feeling.

Maybe it's not all that bad, and I really will find something good?

When she stopped at one of the typical four-story buildings, opposite a stone stoop with cast-iron railings leading to a tall semicircular door, and turned off the engine, I was reluctant to leave the car. I knew I had to keep following the stranger, but I didn't even try to hide my unwillingness.

I couldn't imagine what awaited me next: at the very least, the creepy guy with amber eyes, to whom I would have to justify myself ... At the very most, the collapse of my controversial expectations.

The woman gently nudged me toward the entrance, holding my forearm and letting me pass slightly ahead. She opened the door, and I unwittingly held my breath, as if I were being led to execution.

Maybe it is so ...?

“Stella, where have you been? I was starting to wor—”

But the man didn't finish, staring at the duo who had just entered – a dirty street rat and his own wife in the blood-stained coat. He stood on the narrow staircase leading to the first floor of the apartment, as if towering above us, and I felt small and pathetic.

I wanted to disappear. I wanted to turn around and leave.

We gawked at each other for a few seconds; there was a pause, broken only by the sound of cautious breathing.

“Erik, this is Victor, he’s going to live with us now. Victor,” she said to me, squeezing my arm above the elbow tighter, still not letting go, “this is Erik.”

“What does all this mean?” asked that same Erik, dumbfounded, without moving from his place. “What happened? Is this ... blood?!”

“I’ll explain everything to you later. Everything’s all right. It’s not my blood, don’t worry.”

Her voice was trustful and soft, and like a hypnotic suggestion, it was meant to calm the man who widened his eyes. Her words only partially worked – he kept studying our appearance with distrust.

“Are you insane?!” he finally blurted out, taking a step forward. “This is—”

“Yes, I know what it looks like. Trust me, this is how it has to be,” she insisted stubbornly, fearlessly meeting her husband’s eyes.

Then she walked forward a little, pulling me along with her, touching my shoulder to guide me as I walked by inertia up the steps past the ferocious strangler.

“And now we are in urgent need of the bathroom. I’ll take you there,” she said to me, and I just trailed like a ram.

When I turned back, having reached the first floor, before I had time to look around, I caught the man’s withering gaze –

he continued to stand in place close to the end of the stairs, clenching his fists.

I couldn't tell whether I'm glad or not that I've become the cause of discord between them at that moment.

9. Hot Chocolate

She led me to a half-empty room on the second floor. They live quite well, after all: a second bedroom given to a stranger boy picked up off the street – just like that!

“It will be your room,” the stranger said calmly. “For now, there’s only a bed and closets, but no one expected that— Anyway, if you need anything, just let me know.”

I nodded slightly, still not having time to come to my senses. I didn’t know how to react, and so I didn’t react at all.

“Now let’s go take a shower. I’ll wash your clothes, of course, but I don’t think you’ll need them. Tomorrow we’ll pick out everything you need—”

“No need,” I replied with an old saying.

“Don’t think about it, go to the bathroom.”

The woman opened the door leading to a spacious room, and I felt uneasy again. This can’t be ...

“I’ll bring you some towels and clean clothes now – just until tomorrow. They’ll be a little too big for you, but—”

I sighed, suppressing the objections that were once again welling up inside me.

Just accept everything she gives you, my inner voice advised. I had no other choice.

“I’ll be quick. Feel free to look around.”

“Yeah, of course,” I nodded automatically, still not taking my

eyes off the reflective marble floor.

As soon as she left the bathroom, hurrying away from the room reserved to me, I decided to raise my head and glance around.

Hmm, not bad – there’s a shower, a bathtub, and perfectly clean and shiny plumbing.

And I – so dirty and ugly. I was frightened by my reflection in the cabinet mirror – a bulging-eyed street rat with a green face, smeared here and there with dried blood, a purple bruise on his left cheek, and shadows around his transparent gray eyes and under his cheekbones.

Apparently, I was so lost in my own thoughts that I didn’t notice her appearance – I shuddered and didn’t immediately turn around to face the stranger standing a step away from me.

She no longer had her coat on, and she no longer looked like a victim of robbery, although fatigue had left its mark on her beautiful face.

“I’ll leave the clothes here,” she quickly placed the things she’d brought on the shelf by the wall. “I won’t disturb you ... I’ll visit the room a little later.”

Was it just me, or is she a little nervous?

“It’s all right,” I assured her, still standing motionless in the middle of the bathroom.

She seemed to want to ask something, but hesitated.

“I’ll be either in the room on the other side of the stairs or in the study next door,” she said, waving her hand in that

direction, and I nodded.

I quickly memorized the layout of the corridors – at least briefly – wherever I managed to pass, habitually preparing my escape routes in advance. I hoped the information would be useful only for good purposes, but who knows ...

“If you’re worried about me being able to handle it, don’t be. I’m not a savage, I know what shampoo and soap are, I know how to turn on the water,” I said indifferently.

She ran her hand over her face, clearly embarrassed.

“That’s not what I meant, but ... yes, good. I won’t bother you,” she repeated, and it even seemed to me, she was trying to convince herself not to take any further action.

“Uh-huh,” I nodded, watching out of the corner of my eye as she quickly left me, closing the door behind her.

Yeah, now was the hardest part.

In the bright electric light, I saw the real state of my clothes. Having thrown the dirty laundry into a pile, I eagerly climbed into the bathtub under the hot stream of water, mercilessly trying to wash away the self-loathing along with the top layer of skin. My body was sore and aching, but with masochistic pleasure I scrubbed myself with a prepared washcloth, making everything squeak.

It took a long time, but it was worth it.

I washed my hair three times before I was sure it would no longer look like a dirty mess.

But I still felt uneasy: I dried myself with a white towel,

hesitantly – and with discomfort – and put on clean clothes that smelled faintly of fabric softener. The shirt and pants were indeed too big, but not so big that I'd drown.

I realized with surprise that Erik – the stranger's yellow-eyed husband – was almost as thin as me. Only perhaps a little broader in the shoulders and a little taller – I had to fold up my jeans. The man was over six feet tall, and I barely reached his chin.

Just like my stranger.

For some reason, thinking about her made me smile. Shyly, as if hiding from myself.

I thought I wouldn't mind being friends with her – simply because I'm tired of not trusting anyone.

Yeah, for that reason alone.

Carefully opening the door fogged up from the inside, I stepped into the room. Feeling the smooth parquet floor beneath my bare feet, I slowly approached the bed, already made with fresh linens.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, turning my whole body towards the window, fighting the urge to close my eyes.

“... of course, I understand everything,” the voice of the one whose shirt was now on my shoulders came from the floor below, “you wanted to get a cat, but this isn't even a homeless cat!”

“What kind of comparisons are you making!”

“I couldn't even imagine that— Dark Heavens, you brought a boy from the train station who tried to steal your bag to *our* home!”

“Everyone sees what they want to see – he’s not just a boy from the train station!”

“Really? What am I missing? You’re hiding something – so tell me.”

A pause. Even I found it painful.

“You know perfectly well that I won’t hide anything from you. I’ve already explained it to you – it’s intuition, fate, whatever!”

“You’re crazy.”

“Maybe,” she responded, her tone lower. “Maybe.”

“And how do you expect me to react to all this? ‘Yes, of course, some kid will be living in my home now – go ahead, I don’t mind?!’”

“Erik—”

He snorted angrily, taking a few steps – I could practically feel his abrupt, tense movements with my skin.

“Do you remember what I told him? Do you remember how I promised that if I saw him again, I’d kill him?!”

Well ... She seemed to be playing some kind of game, absolutely not taking into account the tense situation. Who could guarantee he wouldn’t rush up here to the second floor and strangle me?

He has one more reason now.

“First of all,” she began in a calm voice, “everything is different now. Secondly, forgive me for reminding you, but you know perfectly well what it’s like ... And thirdly, you don’t have to keep your word – it won’t be the first time.”

He nearly choked on his indignation, nearly swallowed his protest that was threatening to burst forth.

As indifferent as I was to their relationship, it felt like an unfair blow to the gut.

“Erik,” she spoke quietly – as if she were standing right next to him, “just trust me. It has to be this way. For my sake, please, just believe me.”

He didn’t reply right away.

“I hope you know what you’re asking for,” he said, his voice much more humble. “Okay.”

After a while, she came up to my room, and for a moment her footsteps fell silent in front of the closed door. I imagined her taking a deep breath before knocking.

How strange – after all, I’m the guest in this home ... And she’s asking permission to enter the room.

“Yes,” I responded hoarsely, sitting motionless on the bed, still in the same position.

“How are you?” she asked with a curious smile, finding herself inside, seeing me, pretty refreshed after my shower.

“Fine.”

I wouldn’t say it was great – I was worried about both their recent conversation and the uncertainty of what would happen next.

“Should I get you a hairdryer?”

I shook my head, pushing my damp hair off my forehead.

“Nope.”

Come on, talk me into it. I suddenly developed a taste for this unusual game, where I run away from her care, and she, as the saying about harm goes, forcefully causes love to me.

“Sure?” she narrowed her eyes, and the barely noticeable smile on her beautiful face made me chuckle.

I’m playing with fire.

The hairdryer would have been just right – I was getting cold again, and I was unable to dry my hair thoroughly.

“I’ll go get it, and then you decide,” she said, turning on her heels to leave, but then, as if remembering something, she looked back at me. “Ah yes ... Do you like hot chocolate?”

I blorted nervously, but then, more reservedly, I replied curtly, “Yes.”

And she disappeared through the door.

When the stranger brought the hairdryer – less than half a minute had passed – I humbly thanked her, and as soon as she left, I got to work.

The warm air and the dull buzzing in my ear made me sleepy, and when I finished, I lay down on the bed, face down in the pillow, pulling my legs up to my stomach.

Stella – I remembered her name through my half-sleep before I realized she was in the room – walked carefully to the nightstand, placing something that sounded like a mug on the surface.

“Are you asleep?” she asked quietly, but I decided not to answer.

I wanted her to think I really was asleep. Or maybe I was, and this was all a dream ...?

Even without seeing her face – she was standing behind me – I felt her smiling, barely audibly letting out air through her nose.

She turned off the light and covered my back with the edge of the blanket, on top of which I curled up in the fetal position.

For a few minutes after she left, I lay motionless with my eyes closed, afraid to frighten away the unusual and strange moment: I'm warm, I'm safe, I'm ... *home*.

Maybe not in my own home, but—

I untangled myself from the blanket, sat cross-legged on the bed, and then drank the hot chocolate Stella had brought me. It wasn't as hot anymore, but somehow the warmth still spread from my stomach throughout my body.

Then I curled up in the corner of the blanket as if nothing had changed and closed my eyes.

Somewhere in the distance, the avenue, parallel to the street where the apartment was located, was humming, the wind was lightly hitting the glass, the man and the woman on the opposite side of the floor were peacefully discussing some of their affairs, and I, indeed, without noticing it, fell into a peaceful sleep.

For some reason, I dreamed I was a tabby cat, who, like all cats, had four paws, ears, whiskers, and a tail. I couldn't learn to burp hairballs, and the amber-eyed man chased me off the chair, but I still – out of spite – climbed onto the brocade cushions, ripping out threads with my claws and leaving traces

of my presence.

Then someone lifted me into their arms – so much so that my head spun – but the warm, cozy embrace was my favorite cradle. I hid my sharp claws and purred, inhaling the scent of familiar perfume, tickling the woman's neck with my whiskers.

Deep down, I knew I was not a cat at all, but I had to play the part to stay in her arms a little longer.

10. Story of My Life

I woke up not from the cold, as usual, but from the glare of the sun on the opposite wall that fell through the wide window.

I instantly realized where I was; I immediately remembered what had happened.

My body insistently demanded movement, throwing off the blanket as if forgetting yesterday's beating. First, I went to the bathroom – to use the toilet – washed myself, and soon I was opening the door, intending to go down to the first floor.

I had no idea what time it was, but judging by the sounds, the day had long since begun for those who had taken me in.

I bumped into the yellow-eyed man emerging from one of the wide openings into the living room, opposite the stairs leading up. To my surprise, he reacted calmly to me, but didn't miss the opportunity to look me up and down with an appraising gaze.

“Want breakfast?” he asked.

A lump stuck in my throat, and I just nodded.

He probably thinks I can't even talk.

The stranger named Stella emerged from the kitchen – I had correctly guessed the direction when I first got in this home – with a laptop in her hands.

“Good morning, Victor,” she said, smiling so that my palms sweated in a fluster. “How are you?”

“Hi,” I replied, glancing sideways at her husband.

Either he was replaced, or he really did change his mind during the night, since I don't see mortal danger in his face.

Erik, in his turn, moved from his place, heading towards her, and when they found themselves on the same level, they exchanged meaningful glances, barely touching shoulders, lingering their gazes on each other a little longer than usual, and then he walked on without turning around.

He loves her. They're a very beautiful couple.

"Just a few more minutes, and we'll go to the kitchen," the woman said, looking at me.

"As you say," I shrugged, following close behind her.

We found ourselves in the living room; as I recalled the image I had glimpsed earlier, I noted how perfect everything was in their home, down to the last detail.

Even a book of an unfamiliar writer, carelessly left on the coffee table, a cushion leaning aslant against the back of the L-shaped sofa ... Apart from that, I was left to silently marvel at the spacious room with its tall windows, the TV panel that took up the entire wall between the two openings, and, of course, the main object of the living room space – the black lacquered grand piano at the right wall.

It seemed minimalistic, but life-affirming.

Stella put the computer on the sofa, turning to leave, but noticing my interest in the musical instrument.

"Can you play?" she asked.

"No, of course not," I replied, confused. "I never had

a chance.”

However, I spent hours watching the pianist in the waiting room – this was at Grand Central – dreaming that someday I would repeat everything he did live, and not just in my head.

“But I can play the guitar,” I blurted out after a pause, not wanting to lose face.

It came out kind of awkward. Whatever.

“Great. Erik has a guitar – if you want, you can play for us.”

It seems to me, that same Erik has everything – perhaps, I’m starting to envy him.

“Shall we go?” Stella lightly touched my elbow, and I obeyed, walking back into the corridor and into the kitchen.

The smell of fresh toast, fried bacon, and a bunch of other edibles whetted my appetite, and I involuntarily swallowed. The woman sat down on a high stool at the bar table, encouraging me to follow her example, and I eagerly settled in opposite, glancing at her husband, who was doing some witchcraft over the coffee in a cezve.

“See, I’m a lazy bum, and he’s making me breakfast,” the stranger chuckled, propping her chin on her hand.

“You mean, when you cook for me, I’m a lazy bum?”

Erik’s eyes widened as he turned to look at her, and his feigned sternness still wasn’t convincing.

“That’s not what I meant,” she spread her hands, and he smiled, turning away.

What an idyll! I lowered my head, hiding my eyes in the

hair that had fallen across my forehead – to my shame, I was beginning to resent their well-being.

“What are your plans for the day?”

I didn’t immediately realize she was addressing me and shrugged, confused.

“Plans? I hadn’t thought about that.”

Erik, meanwhile, had served almost everything on the table, and silence hung in the air, broken only by the sound of plates being placed on the counter.

The stranger clearly wanted to say something, but played it safe, and I kept staring at the wooden napkin stand.

She took a sip of coffee, and I copied her.

“Why did you—” she suddenly lifted her chin, looking up at her husband, who was sipping coffee but not even bothering to take the seat next to us, “... cook for two?”

“I’m not hungry,” he shrugged, just like I had a minute ago.

“Erik.”

“I won’t have time, don’t start,” he protested peacefully.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Yes, I am,” he grinned wryly.

And then he leaned towards her, kissing her on the lips, but only with a short touch, taking her attention to himself, wrapping one arm around her waist. The stranger’s breath caught in his seemingly innocent gesture.

“I love you,” he said in a velvety voice in her ear, obviously reserving the intimate phrase only for the two of them, but I have

a very good ear.

I might not have wanted to hear it, but I had to.

“I love you too,” she smiled at him, lifting her head, but he had already pulled away.

“I have to go,” he responded, devouring her with his eyes, taking a few steps aside. “See you later.”

He addressed the latter, surprisingly good-naturedly, to me. I nodded, and a moment later the man was already out of the kitchen, quickly putting on his coat and heading down the stairs to the exit.

As soon as the door slammed behind him, Stella sighed and bit into a piece of toast with a loud crunch.

“Story of my life,” she said, the corners of her lips lifting slightly, but I couldn’t tell if she was in a good or bad mood. “Enjoy your meal, have at it, otherwise everything will get cold.”

11. Doll

I quickly forgot about her husband and the nightmarish events of the previous day – we were simply chatting, sitting in the spacious kitchen, gobbling up breakfast, discussing various little things.

Yes, at first, I only cautiously glanced at her beautiful face from under my bangs, but she made it clear to me that I could relax and not wait for permission to take this or that dish from the table.

Soon I was no longer so convinced that we had nothing in common – sometimes it seemed to me that I had known her for a very long time.

Moreover, I was amused by how happy she was when I ate two candies from the glass bowl on the counter – my stomach simply wasn't capable of more after a full breakfast.

And to my own surprise, I agreed to the offer to buy me clothes. I knew she probably saw me as a doll to dress up and take out for walks, but selfish interests prevailed.

What's so bad about letting her play parent?

I answered my own question – I didn't like the answer – but still, the pros outweighed the cons.

Naturally, I would have preferred not to participate at all, but Stella insisted I go with her.

As she claimed, I still have to choose the shoes myself ... I am

sure that this is another of her tricks, and I was prepared for the fact that she is taking me along with her to buy my favor.

Why she needs this – I have no idea ... But who can understand her, this strange woman?

I was afraid that she would drag me by force into the brand-name boutiques at which the car stopped, and when once again I refused to get out of the car, hugging myself and frowning, the stranger leaned slightly towards me sitting in the front seat.

“What’s bothering you?”

Well, I couldn’t tell her I’d feel out of place under the salespeople’s gaze. I think I overestimated my courage.

“Just give it a try. Play a role, have a good time, let loose. Come on, it’ll be fun. You have a good imagination – think of something that will be enjoyable.”

Oddly enough, it worked on me.

Who would dare judge a rich mom’s capricious brat who came with the sole purpose of humiliating everyone in the sales floor?

“Your clothes are complete crap!” I drawled, making a dismissive gesture with my hand, and the stranger burst out laughing.

“That’s a different story!” she exclaimed, smiling broadly. “And most importantly, stay yourself. You’re beautiful,” she concluded, and before I could respond, she swung the door open and left the car.

I followed her, already focused on the upcoming amusement, but her words stuck deep in my head.

I couldn't tell if she was serious or joking.

It wasn't immediately clear where to start. I tried on basic items – jeans, T-shirts, hoodies, solid colors but nice to the touch – with pleasure. For some reason, I didn't feel like racking my brains, so I chose almost everything black.

The clothes were well-made, the size was right, and they fit perfectly – I didn't look like a ragamuffin. Yes, I didn't believe the reflection: the only thing it showed reliably was the bruise on my face. The rest – the glowing eyes and the strangely smiling mouth – were clearly someone else's.

I myself was amazed at how quickly enthusiasm and courage took over from the eternally hunted state and agitation.

“Don't you want other jeans?” Stella asked me, standing on the other side of the curtain – I wouldn't let her into the fitting room.

“Nope,” I blurted out capriciously, and I realized too late that it would be exactly like with the hairdryer.

“But come to think of it?”

I zipped up my fly and pulled down my T-shirt. No, my arms might be skinny and bruised – but apart from that, there's definitely something to it!

A hand suddenly appeared through a gap in the curtain, holding a pair of jeans.

“Try them on!”

As soon as I took the clothing from her fingers, accidentally touching her skin, her hand disappeared, and she hurried,

retreating steps were the sign that I had no one to complain to.

Okay, so let it be these ...

Stella handled the consultants who sensed fertile ground and obligingly carried out all instructions so briskly that I began to think: I don't even know what she does for a living ... She's definitely dominating someone!

"Psst, can I take a look?" she whispered through the curtain, already returning to me, and I barely held back a chuckle.

"Just a second," I breathed out, for some reason starting to feel embarrassed by my bare arms, straightening my back to look at least a little more presentable. "Now you can."

The woman ended up in the same fitting room with me; we shouldn't have been cramped, but for some reason I felt short of breath, and my back instantly broke out in sweat.

"Oh," she smiled, nodding meaningfully. "Gorgeous."

Only now did I realize she was holding three hangers of shirts – black, dark blue, and light blue. All three were from the very brand whose boutique I'd refused to go to before.

Anticipating all my objections, she shook her head, hanging the clothes on the free wall hooks.

"No refusal. I want you in a shirt," she said and disappeared behind the curtain, leaving me silently blinking, staring at my reflection.

Thank God, I'm the only one so spoiled – I heard the vulgarity in her phrase.

All three fit me perfectly, I liked all of them. With the very

last one, the black one, I wanted to spend a little longer fiddling around, carefully buttoning all the buttons, including the ones on the cuffs.

Whether it was from thrill or clumsiness, I just couldn't fight the row on the sleeves, for I had to do everything perfectly.

"I'll ask you again – can I take a look?" her voice came from behind the curtain.

Grinding my teeth in frustration, I growled, much harsher than I intended, instantly embarrassed, "Yes!"

When I raised my head, Stella, having got inside, was looking at me with wide eyes, carefully approaching to arm's length.

"What's wrong?" she asked delicately.

"I can't," I replied plaintively, looking away.

"What is it?"

But I didn't need to answer: she was already lifting my right hand up to eye level, having deftly handled two buttons. She did the same with my other hand.

"Beautiful," she smiled, touching the row of fittings fastened on my chest below the collarbones, and I opened my mouth in confusion.

My heart was about to jump out of my chest from her strange action, and I felt a sudden flush of heat. I met her gaze, and she was so close that my head was starting to spin.

I froze, feeling her brush my hair away from my face without touching my skin, and there had never been a more delirious moment in my life.

I suddenly thought that she would kiss me – and I was already prepared for anything – but she quickly pulled away, as if nothing had happened, smiling softly and looking me up and down.

“Did I understand correctly – are you tired already?” she asked, breaking the awkward silence.

I nodded, nervously tugging at the hem of my shirt.

“You can just go like this, it suits you very well. We’ll take whatever you like?”

I agreed again, eager to get out of this ill-fated fitting room as quickly as possible.

Then, with our bags in hand, we headed off to buy shoes.

Erik’s boots were too big for me – in his size fourteen I felt like I was wearing skis, but I didn’t complain: my old, torn sneakers were also far from suitable for my feet.

I didn’t even know my size, and I’d never bought shoes before ... It’s strange that I even had the chance to go shopping. Even if I ever imagined shopping, it certainly wasn’t like this.

I was pleased – and I was afraid to admit *how much* ... And I was also grateful. This is rare – I’m not used to such an attitude.

“Why don’t you buy something for yourself?” I asked, indifferently surveying the selection of men’s shoes at yet another boutique. “I mean, not here,” I glanced around, “but in general.”

The stranger touched my elbow, pointing to the thick-soled, high-topped boots, and I shrugged one shoulder.

“I rarely like anything,” she said in that same timbre that stirred my every cell, “but when I do – it surely isn’t going

anywhere from me. Don't worry – I just haven't seen anything interesting yet.”

“Okay, then,” I tried to smile.

“These ones, please,” the woman turned her attention to the salesperson, who was waiting for her to finally speak, “and these ones. We have to start somewhere. What's your size – a ten?”

I nodded hesitantly – she probably knew better.

“After we've chosen the shoes, we'll take a coffee break,” she reassured me.

I rolled my eyes, but sat down on the ottoman.

Two stores later, we finally found something we both liked. Two pairs, actually. And she got the size right – I wouldn't have guessed it myself.

Walking in my new shoes was much more pleasant, and I even started to feel better. Especially since she promised to buy me coffee.

Having dropped our things in the car, we ran to a coffee shop we picked, and both of us, without outerwear – me in the new shirt and jeans, no longer with tags, and she in a thin, loose blouse tucked into high suit pants, with a tiny bag over her shoulder – sat down at a table in a cozy corner, like a blissfully flying young couple.

How strange and unfamiliar it is to observe the world from a different perspective. This is the same New York, after all. The very one – cynical, dirty, deceitful; colorful, like an enticing wrapper of a useless, disgusting-tasting candy.

When I came out of my thoughts, I found that the waiter and Stella were staring at me expectantly.

Not immediately realizing what I needed to do – the stranger, as always, had given me a false idea of freedom – I bleated, “Latte.”

“And a cappuccino,” the woman added, giving the waiter a smile.

He understood and retreated.

I hid behind the hair that had fallen over my face again, feeling her gaze fixed on me. I had almost gotten used to her close look, but my restless nature was itching to ruin everything.

“I’m thinking,” I began slowly, “that despite the fact that you washed and dressed me, I remain the same as I was.”

She folded her palms on the table, leaning forward slightly toward me. Two rings glittered on her slender ring finger.

“What were you like?”

She always asks questions that I have no answer to – either too difficult or almost impossible!

“As if you yourself don’t know what I’m talking about,” I muttered, regretting that I had even started this pointless conversation.

I am a fool such as the world has never known.

“Don’t you see, I’m not going to forcibly change you!” Stella leaned even further over the table, trying to meet my gaze.

I snorted, biting my lips until they bled.

“Look at me,” she asked.

I stubbornly remained silent, turning away.

“Please, look at me.”

It was only because I discerned a tremor in her gentle voice that I looked up at her. She was pale – probably almost as pale as me – and very worried. I felt sick of myself.

“You know, you know perfectly well – I’ll ruin everything. It’s all for nothing – I’m not capable of anything good!” I spoke heatedly, and she got even more frightened. “You shouldn’t have started all this – I won’t be a homebody, I won’t be of any use for you!”

I nervously threw my hair back with my hand, and the stranger grabbed my wrist, which was now above the table.

“I can’t give you what you want,” I breathed out.

“You have no idea what I want,” she shook her head.

“And you don’t know what I want!”

“Because you don’t know it yourself!”

Swallowing defeat in the verbal battle again, I sat up abruptly, and she released my hand as I leaned back in my chair.

My eyes closed tiredly, and from under my lowered eyelashes I watched as the waiter placed our coffee from the tray on the table.

After Stella sipped her drink, I moved. I placed four sugar cubes in the cup and patiently stirred the sugar with my left hand, while she kept her eye on my fingers.

She probably noticed this morning that I’m left-handed.

And I noticed that her husband is left-handed.

“I hope you still have the energy to look for your jacket?” she said, as if nothing had happened.

I raised an eyebrow – I thought she’d get angry and send me back where she took me from. So, I’m unconsciously pushing her to do this!

“Of course,” I lied. “And you?”

When will I ever figure out how to address her ...? When will I ever figure out anything at all?

12. Good Ear

Whether I was stalling, or whether we were both picky about my outerwear choices, we returned home late. The cuffs occasionally jingled behind us, forgotten on the ceiling handle, but they no longer bothered me – it was even funny how our relationship had changed in these twenty-four hours.

Or it hadn't ...?

I tried to remember all the shopping we'd made today, seemingly necessary but overwhelming: three T-shirts, two pairs of jeans, two hoodies, three shirts; two pairs of shoes, a jacket, a belt, gloves, not to mention underwear and socks.

Maybe I was a doll being dressed up and put in a dollhouse, but right now I didn't mind at all.

I'd sold myself out. Yes, I'd sold myself out, and I didn't regret it one bit.

On the way back, we grabbed some food from the restaurant. I wasn't sure I'd be hungry by the time we got back to the apartment, but the idea of a cozy dinner was inspiring.

Then the stranger showed me the library in Erik's study, and I spent about half an hour reading Jack London stories, my feet up in a chair in the warm light of a lamp, while the stranger was doing something at the computer open on her lap.

A flood of pleasant memories came over me: I rarely thought back to the orphanage in Vienna for a good reason, but the

meager library, where I often spent time reading everything in sight out of boredom – from old textbooks to stupid popular novels – was one of them.

Perhaps I ran away from the orphanage because there was nothing else to read ...?

The woman in the next chair yawned without taking her eyes off the screen, and I glanced at her through the pages of the book.

“What time is it?” I asked, clearly able to make out the face of the antique clock above the study entrance.

“Half past nine,” she replied.

“Does he ... Erik ... always come home this late?”

Stella placed her laptop on the table and stretched, raising her slender, clasped hands. The silky fabric of her blouse accentuated her seductive silhouette, and I couldn't help but admire her, even though there was nothing erotic in my thoughts.

Or was there ...?

I got frightened by my own suspicions, and with an effort of will, I switched my attention from the stranger to the book.

“It's not that late,” she answered my question with a smile. “But he doesn't always leave for the whole day ... From time to time.”

I nodded, satisfied with the information. He simply works late and irregularly – there's nothing strange about that; not all representatives of the human race work from nine to six.

“Do you go to work?”

I looked at her again, and the woman had no longer touched

the computer, even the lid was closed.

“No.”

“So you’re home all day?”

Well, I have to know what awaits me if I intend to spend this week here!

“Not all day,” she tilted her head slightly to the side, catching my gaze, “I usually can’t sit still. If you want, I’ll take you with me, or you can take a break from me.”

She spread her hands with a smile, but I remained serious. I guess I was just tired.

As if hearing my thoughts, she said, “You seem even more thoughtful than you were during the day. Do you want to sleep?”

I shrugged, setting the book down on the table and straightening my legs.

“Perhaps. I haven’t figured it out yet,” I sighed. “But you’re right, I should be sleeping.”

“You can take the book and read it in bed.”

So I did, taking Jack London and his characters with me, and she, approving of my choice, wished me goodnight.

Already lying in bed under the blanket in just my underwear, immersed in a bookish world where the working man Martin had fallen in love with a bon ton girl, transforming himself for a higher purpose, I listened from time to time to what was happening in the home. Judging by the sounds, Stella had taken a bath shortly after I left, and then she’d walked up and down the stairs several times, stepping carefully – probably so as not

to wake me. Only after midnight, when the stranger had gone to the bedroom, did the front door open, letting in the head of the family.

I had long since become accustomed to my exceptionally good ear, and more often than not it had saved me in a variety of situations, but now I cursed the ability to hear through walls.

Because, upon returning home, Erik headed to his wife. And instead of, for fuck's sake, going to bed, he decided to fulfil his marital duties!

I didn't immediately understand what was going on: at first they were quietly purring pleasant nonsense to each other, happy to see each other, but then the ambiguous fuss soon turned into quite unambiguous groans of impatience.

Of course I've seen people having sex; of course I've *heard* people having sex! But it has never happened this way ... this wildly and terrifyingly for me.

I covered my head with the blanket, but still couldn't get rid of these unbearable images that popped into my thoughts, recreated on the basis of the sounds I heard.

I covered my ears with my hands, I bit my fingers to switch my attention to the pain, but it was all in vain; I literally saw him caressing her, how he hovered over her, moving inside her, and how she scratched his shoulders, arching her back ...

The way sweat glistened on her bare breasts, collarbones, and neck. The way she whispered his name with just her lips.

I realized with horror that I was aroused myself.

And moreover – that I wished I were in his place.

I hated myself for it, trying to find another explanation, while the torture continued excruciatingly long ... Come on, seriously, stop!

Enough! Please, enough!

But they seemed to be mocking me, not wanting to stop what they were doing – the man was no longer holding back his demanding gasps and groans between kisses, while Stella remained almost silent, and I could only hear her rapid breathing and trying to take air into her lungs.

It was only when they moaned in unison, exhaling, and he, echoing her, came to his senses in her arms, that I whimpered louder than I intended.

I kept shivering, and through the silent sobs that rolled over me, I realized they had heard me.

Or they hadn't ...?

He had. She hadn't.

13. Hilarious

Three days passed in their home: I couldn't even believe that now in the mornings I'm cooked breakfast, during the day – mostly in the company of the stranger – I'm taken for walks and entertained, and I spend the evenings with the book in the warm and cozy bed.

They no longer had sex around me.

And I also tried to avoid Erik, even though I had no objective reason to. He reacted to me adequately, if not to say friendly, although he did not intentionally try to become friends with me, keeping his distance, besides, I recognized Stella's husband as a very interesting and witty interlocutor.

But there was something frightening about his appearance – either he moved like a predatory beast, or I knew that, if something happened, I wouldn't be able to cope with him ...

For the umpteenth time, I caught myself feeling jealous of her. Possessive, as if she shouldn't spend time with anyone but me.

I knew my feelings were foolish and naive, and I was ashamed of them.

I no longer refused invitations to go for a walk in Battery Park or have dessert – simply because it was great to mess around in her company.

She gave me personal space, and at some point I could say I wanted to be alone – and the stranger would just nod and leave

me to my thoughts – or silence.

This morning, she brought me a box with the phone and keys. I didn't immediately find what to say – and simply thanked her.

I wasn't sure I'd dare leave the home on my own, and the communication tool with my current attachment was unnecessary, but something told me she had, first and foremost, deprived herself of the temptation to chain me up.

She enjoyed taking care of me – I got it almost immediately, even if I didn't believe it – and I made my decision. I would let her do it until one of us decided to quit the game.

Moreover, the dialogue overheard between the hosts gave rise to some reflections.

Returning from the kitchen, chewing on the move the candy from the glass bowl on the bar, I stopped at the entrance to the living room, not daring to give away my presence.

“... I never realized until now,” the stranger's husband said quietly, “what all this means to you. We've been together for so many years, and it's just ... so natural—”

He chuckled, maybe smiling, and the woman stirred on the sofa, apparently staring at him questioningly.

“You remember – by the way, it wasn't that long ago: Leigh joked that it was time for us to have kids ... Well, you won't believe it ... but I agree with him.”

“What ...?” Stella breathed out.

“We've never discussed it – and you know perfectly well why ...” He hesitantly broke off his sentences, catching his breath,

in an uncharacteristic manner. “But ... if we *suddenly* had a child, I’d say I’m ready for it.”

There was an ambiguous silence, which I would have interpreted as shock on the stranger’s part.

“Are you serious?” she finally managed to say.

Her voice sounded more baffled than joyful.

“I wouldn’t joke ... like that. I’ve always avoided the subject ... But after your ... Victor showed up,” he deliberately emphasized my name in the middle of his sentence, “it was like someone punched me in the nose, and it dawned on me.”

She was silent again, and I, standing behind the wall, was afraid to move, lest, as usually happens at such moments, a single creaking floorboard should confuse those speaking.

“I realized you’d wanted a child for a long time, and I was a blind egotist, thinking only of myself. And also – since things have turned out this way: if this boy were our son, I wouldn’t mind. Of course, if only we could persuade him to behave more calmly and fatten him up a bit ... But otherwise, he’s hilarious.”

I was dumbfounded, and I guessed Stella was too.

Hilarious ...?

Does it matter that I’m already fourteen and unlikely to change? Or is this not about me, but about some abstract child whose place I mistakenly took? After all, really, all she needed was an object to direct her love and care toward!

Erik is away from home all day – and he doesn’t really talk about where he goes or for how long; some things – Stella often

picked up calls these days – don't occupy her thoughts or time completely ... Naturally, she'll want to give a part of herself to someone.

That someone turned out to be me. Did I deserve such a gift ...?

“Everything happens at the right time. Your confession took me completely by surprise,” the stranger said, judging by the sound, resting her head on her husband's shoulder. “I don't even know what to do with this information. And as for Victor ...” She smiled, and I felt a strange flush of fluster rise to my cheeks. “When you get to know him better, you'll agree with me – he's adorable.”

She said it sincerely.

I suddenly thought that if they had adopted me, I wouldn't have run away.

“I believe you,” Erik replied with a sigh. “But I admit, I'm a little jealous of him.”

It was said with a smirk, meant to hide his true feelings, but if he really sees me as a rival, then he clearly has some self-esteem issues. A hunted minor weakling couldn't possibly come between him and Stella, could he?

My fantasies are out of place here – the gap between us is too great, I can only drag someone to the bottom, but not make them happy.

Soon I had to enter, as if nothing had happened, the living room, where Stella and Erik were sitting close to each other on

the irregularly shaped sofa, still leaning back on the pillows.

I twirled the candy wrappers in my hands, they looked at me with serious faces, but smiling eyes, and I even felt a little uneasy.

When I walked further and sat down on the edge of the sofa on the stranger's side, she, continuing to prop up her husband's side with her sharp shoulder, said, "I'm inviting you both to dinner this evening. Don't you dare to refuse."

Erik gave a stifled laugh, and I just stared at her in confusion from under my hair that had fallen over my face.

"Where do I fit in? I have the whole day free," I shrugged. "Where are we going?"

This is probably not the way to ask ... But curiosity got the better of etiquette.

"The steakhouse near Central Park. I've been there with Kaftz a couple of times, and we liked it."

Kaftz, aka Kaftzefoni, was some mate of hers – or business partner, perhaps – who was constantly calling with questions, as if nothing could be resolved without her involvement. Erik, as far as I could tell, knew him and wasn't at all jealous, even though I'd personally detected a clear, undisguised interest from this phone guy in the occasional informal conversations I'd overheard ... Perhaps I'm paranoid and see a catch everywhere, but if I were him, I wouldn't appreciate the increased attention paid to my own wife!

"Okay," Erik said curtly, curling his fingers over the fabric of her blouse on her forearm, his amber eyes casting a glance

at me.

“Table at seven. I’ll be back a little after six, and then we’ll go right away.”

“Are you going somewhere?” I asked, completely idiotic.

All I needed to know was that.

“Yes, it’s about the bar ... I’ll tell you all about it over dinner,” she smiled softly at me, and my heart began to beat unevenly somewhere in my throat.

“I got it,” I concluded.

I’m either left home alone or with Erik. Well, the day has come when my stranger goes about her business – I really shouldn’t impose myself on her, should I?

After some time, she did indeed leave, and I, already confidently finding my way around their apartment, wandered aimlessly from the kitchen – with sweets and tea – to the room upstairs and returned to the living room, making sure that the yellow-eyed man was concentrating on something in the study.

My attention was drawn to the complex blueprints spread across the wide oak table, the pile of papers with notes, and the house of cards built in the corner, but I didn’t bother asking questions; I felt like if I walked right up to Erik and shouted something in his ear, he wouldn’t even notice.

Then I circled around the grand piano, carefully opening and closing the lid of the black and white keys, not daring to sit down on the stool with curved legs, but still, my restless nature took over: I poked my finger at one of the keys on the right side of the

keyboard, and the sound, clear and high, spread throughout the room, resonating against the walls and windows.

“Stella said you wanted to learn to play,” the voice said behind me, and I cautiously pulled my hand back.

I turned around.

“That’s what she said ...?”

Actually, that’s not exactly what I meant, but she must have interpreted my interest in the instrument in her own way. She was right, though – intention was precisely what was behind the intrigued glances I cast at the grand piano.

“If you want, I can show you something,” Erik said calmly, looking down at me, crossing his arms over his chest.

Should I agree or refuse? A stubborn, proud voice inside me kept telling me there was a catch, but I pushed it deep down, giving in to childish curiosity.

“Go ahead,” I nodded.

And he actually began to explain it to me.

At first I was puffing and frowning, and we both carefully, adjusting to each other, figured out what to start from.

He wrote notes on a lined sheet of paper, explaining what a musical staff, treble and bass clefs, rhythms, measures, durations were, and on the one hand, my head was starting to swell from the abundance of new knowledge, but on the other hand, I noticed with satisfaction how he was changing his opinion about me.

I caught on quickly – but at the very beginning he doubted

that I could read.

“I, of course, have no idea how to teach music, but the main thing, as I believe,” the man said in a mentoring tone, “is to see the correspondence between sounds and that soulless ‘math’”, that’s how he dubbed the formalized method of notation, the musical language, “which defines the coordinate system.”

I understood what he meant, but it seemed we wouldn’t get to real music anytime soon. My spatial awareness, which had come in handy for playing guitar, strained a bit, but it managed to line up the semitones, recreated by the black-and-white keyboard, arranged in a row.

The funniest thing was that, while receiving theoretical information, I was gaining one insight after another, for practicing exclusively by ear and initially copying hand positions and chord combinations on the guitar, I had no idea what pattern the music I was playing followed – I was guided only by intuition.

So that’s how it all works ...!

And I also realized that, despite his confident demeanor, Erik found it difficult to explain anything to anyone – especially something he considered obvious. For me, having learned about musical scales from scratch, my whole world was turned upside down, and consonance no longer seemed like magic, but merely a rule. However, we both agreed that no matter how easy it was to calculate whether a particular combination was consonant or dissonant, the magic of music was still there.

I recognized his keen interest and involvement in what he was

so enthusiastically talking about, even though toward the end I found his explanations difficult to understand.

At the very end, apparently taking pity on me, the amber-eyed man wrote a short fragment of some monophonic melody and asked me to play it, making sure I'd found the starting point on the keys. Without requiring proper hand positioning – just reproducing the rhythm, the duration, the legato – he deliberately tried to incorporate into the exercise much of what he'd managed to mention over the past couple of hours – and, of course, the notes. With just my right hand – biting my lip in concentration, I played his simple melody.

“Why did you lie about never having studied anywhere?” he suddenly asked, not angrily, but with disappointed suspicion, watching me, my hands already folded in my lap.

I flushed.

“No, I haven't! I've never played the piano!”

I felt really offended that, instead of praising me, he was picking on me with weird questions because of my success.

“There's no way you'll get it all at first attempt. And your hands – you even hold your hand correctly, well, almost ...”

He sighed, looking at me expectantly.

I shrugged – I was used to injustice. Unfortunately, I often got into trouble because I was much more capable than those around me.

Or maybe he's just jealous: I suppose he had to spend years honing his skills and abilities, taking lessons from someone, and

I came along and understood everything with ease!

“I just saw others doing it,” I said.

After a long pause, Erik finally uttered words of approval – they were difficult for him, but they meant much more to me than he realized.

“Not bad for a first attempt,” he said, smiling slightly with his thin lips, leaning his hip against the grand piano’s shiny side.

Of course not bad! Just don’t let him think that this is solely his merit.

“You haven’t changed your mind, will you keep learning?”

I raised an eyebrow in surprise – really ...?

“We can start with practice tomorrow. Just don’t tell Stella if possible; let her see the finished result.”

I swallowed the phrase of unconditional agreement and suppressed the puppyish delight that was bursting to come out, and then only nodded restrainedly, albeit with a smile.

“Okay,” I breathed out. “Thank you.”

Still not believing what was happening, I tried to leave as calmly as possible, but judging by Erik’s reaction, he understood perfectly well how joyfully his promise to teach me music was taken.

14. Hairdryer

Before the stranger was back home, I washed my hair, but I miscalculated the timing, and so I met her with wet hair.

As I skipped down the stairs to the first floor, I realized too late that I hadn't even bothered to hide my impatience. In her cream-colored coat trimmed with lynx fur, she lit up the corridor like a moon, and, smiling broadly, she greeted Erik, who had approached her before me, with a hearty kiss on the cheek, and then turned to me.

"Good evening, Victor," she directed her gaze to me, and I readily broke into a smile.

Erik snorted good-humoredly, and Stella, completely naturally perceiving my behavior, took a couple of steps towards me, but stopped at arm's length.

"Hi," I bleated belatedly, hiding my sweaty palms behind my back.

"You know where the hairdryer is, right?"

I didn't expect such a question, blinking in confusion.

"Oh, come on, no need," I shrugged, already suspecting she wouldn't leave me alone that easily.

"Yes, there is."

"Nope," I shook my head again, causing my hair to fall across my forehead, with a noticeable chill on my skin.

I had already learned this trick: I deliberately provoked her

with my stubbornness, getting an inexplicable pleasure from persistent persuasion in response to my resistance. If only I'd gotten to know her well enough to know how to get even closer to her ...

“What do you mean, ‘nope’?”

Already barely holding back her laughter, she threw her coat off her shoulders, intending to hang it in the wardrobe, and Erik was right there, taking over her clothes.

“Let me help you,” he offered obligingly.

The stranger gently stroked his arm from wrist to elbow and thanked him with her eyes.

Erik decided to pretend that our disputes did not concern him, and only looked back when Stella approached me again.

“We’re not going anywhere until your hair dries,” she said, tilting her head slightly to the side and studying my face.

“What’s the big deal?” I protested. “What’s wrong with that ...?”

It was a little more forced than it actually was.

“Better not argue, or she’ll forcefully dry your hair,” her husband responded, already closing the wardrobe door.

“That’s a good idea!”

I didn’t believe him, but I’d underestimated the stranger’s zeal. Already feeling soft fingers on my forearm, I glanced briefly at the man, as if asking for help, and he, apparently, was no less surprised – his joke had come true.

“Come with me,” she demanded gently but

uncompromisingly, directing me toward the stairs to the second floor, and I moved my feet for a few seconds, and then looked back again.

Erik rolled his eyes and walked into the kitchen, no longer interfering in our stupid game, and I had to admit: it was my own fault.

When she sat me down on the bed in the room reserved to me, and went into the bathroom, where the hairdryer lay in the cabinet, untouched since last time, I even felt uncomfortable.

“It’s all dry now,” I pleaded, unconvincingly, one last time. “Really. You’re not going to—”

But she had already plugged the hairdryer into the socket and returned to her submissive victim, holding the object at the ready, like a weapon, lowered along her body.

“I can do it myself—”

She leaned over me, carefully reaching out and running her hand through the hair at the edge of my forehead, pushing it back. She was merely checking the veracity of my words, but my throat instantly went dry, and an uncontrollable tremor began to spread through my body, from my stomach to my limbs, filling every cell with languor.

It’s me who’s the pervert. I’m the one who perceives her touch as sexual provocation, and all she wants to do is blow-dry my hair.

Oh my God ...

I couldn’t help the sigh that escaped my lips and closed my eyes, tilting my head forward to hide my face. I tried to sit up

in a way that would reduce the discomfort of my suddenly tight jeans.

My arms instantly broke out in goosebumps – thankfully, it wasn't visible under my shirt – and I tried not to show it as the stranger ran her fingers deeper into my hair, massaging my skin.

“Relax and enjoy,” she whispered with a smile and turned on the hairdryer.

This will be my favorite erotic fantasy from now on.

By the time she finished, I had almost calmed down, but the blood was still boiling in my veins; Stella took my unnatural blush as the effect of the hot air from the hairdryer.

“Much better now, isn't it?” she cheerfully praised the result of her labors, and I wanted to catch her hand, but didn't dare.

“Uh-huh.”

I looked up at her, still sitting on the bed, while she coiled the long cord and pulled out the plug.

“I'll change. Meet me downstairs,” she smiled, catching my still confused smile in return, and left me alone.

I didn't go down to the first floor right away; I needed to come to my senses.

15. Family Dinner

Erik was driving – somehow nervously, unusually – though maybe I was just used to Stella’s smooth driving style – and I was hot in the back seat. I was wearing the jacket, albeit unbuttoned, and the puzzle pieces just weren’t coming together in my head.

I kept thinking that this was some kind of *family* trip.

I understood perfectly well that my sick mind was simply constructing a picture in a favorable environment, and my attachment was based solely on the events of the past three – well, four – days, not on objective reasons.

It was unusual for me to experience trust and other good feelings; I still couldn’t believe that a good streak had finally arrived in my life, and so for every positive moment I looked for a few spoiling details.

Just to keep my guard up.

However, nothing could dampen our spirits now, especially after we left Erik’s white crossover in the parking lot a block away and walked in a single line, heading to the restaurant.

A high table by the window overlooking a busy street, cozy twilight and subdued lighting, unobtrusive music, a relaxed, weekend-like atmosphere ... And, of course, the very beautiful woman in front of us, brightening the evening.

I noticed Erik leading her by the arm with a proud ‘she’s with me’ look, and how both men and women in the hall held their eyes

on the stranger; and it certainly wasn't the long, silky black dress, discreet and concealing, or the chestnut curls falling naturally over her shoulders – she looked reasonably casual.

Her husband, with great pleasure, helped her with the chair, casually touching her bare shoulder, and then sat down next to me on the left, so he could see the queen in all her manifestations.

Or so he wouldn't bump anyone with his left elbow.

Soon Erik was deep in studying the wine list, occasionally glancing over the brochure at the stranger, while I tried to concentrate on my food choices. All the previous times I visited the dining establishments, I ordered the same thing as Stella, but this time I wanted to show my individuality.

Individuality in steaks is, of course, childish, but it's also a chance to show independence.

When I realized the choice would be trivial, I wasn't at all upset – this way I would have time for something more important.

“While no one has noticed us,” the stranger said, leaning forward slightly, meaning the waiter, “tell me how your day went.”

Erik put the wine list down, picked up the menu, and answered in the tone of a perfect liar, “I'm doing the usual. I was working on the project, forgot to eat lunch, and spent a long time ironing my shirt.”

The shirt really did look perfect ... But how could he not mention the music!

“He taught me to play the piano,” I blew his cover. “He taught me music theory.”

“Oh!” Stella gasped, her dark eyes widening in amazement.

“But I asked you!” Erik hissed, rolling his eyes. “How can I trust you after that?”

He wasn’t angry, he just didn’t expect me to blurt out too much.

“I can’t keep something like that to myself! It’s too ... significant.”

My interlocutor hemmed, but said nothing.

“I’m happy,” Stella supported me, for her part. “That’s very good news. Really.”

And again, the sincere and warm feeling glistened in the stranger’s affectionate gaze, which made me feel both pleasant and thrilled – after moments like these, I wanted to tell her everything in the world, just to receive that dose of attention in return every time.

“And how’s your day going?” Erik decided to change the subject. “You promised to tell us about the bar.”

“Yes,” she clasped her hands. “Everything’s great – the most interesting part is about to begin.”

It turned out that all the commotion in recent days was caused by the intention to open the bar, and she was solving a bunch of issues and getting to know the internal processes.

Interestingly, she seemed to have a keen understanding of what she was dealing with, especially when it came

to entertainment establishments.

“The funniest thing is, the previous owners also have a nightclub in northern Brooklyn, and they’re trying to run it from the last forces ...” the woman continued after we’d ordered the meals, leaning across the table again and unable to hold her laughter. “Kaftz keeps trying to get me to do business, and you know why ...?”

We stared at her questioningly, fascinated by the gestures of her graceful hands.

“Do you remember the club where he and his devils perform?” she asked her husband, who nodded, raising an eyebrow. Then she explained to me, adding, “Kaftzefoni and five other musicians play their extreme metal there, regularly packing three-hundred-person crowds.”

“Not bad,” I responded.

Indeed, any success in music earned my respect, even if I had no idea what kind of music these, as the stranger put it, devils could play in clubs.

“So this is that very club. Well, he’s got ambitions,” she concluded with a smile.

“I’m not surprised he wants you,” Erik said. “All he seems capable of is jumping around the stage. Just so you understand,” he turned his head in my direction, “what they’re doing is primal savagery.”

“It’s for shock value!” Stella objected.

“Don’t make excuses for them.”

“They’re creating the performance!”

“To a low-frequency sound mess!”

“He’s just jealous,” the woman winked at me, and Erik snorted and rolled his eyes.

“Not at all! Performing in front of a crowd of junkies is no fun. Thanks, I’ll pass.”

The waiter meanwhile poured wine, and I watched thoughtfully as the burgundy liquid filled the round, sparkling glasses a third of the way.

As if it were a given, I sipped the tart drink from my glass, following the example of my dining companions, and the bittersweet taste made my jaw clench.

No, I clearly shouldn’t go too far – it’s unlikely a fourteen-year-old, even under supervision and in adult clothing, would look appropriately drunk.

I’ve been acting out of control lately anyway; even without wine, I can blurt out too much or be cheeky where I shouldn’t.

I wanted to leave a good impression of the evening, not only in my own mind, but also in the minds of Stella and Erik.

While we were waiting for the food, the conversation gradually turned to travel and European capitals, and then, for some reason, we began discussing cyclists in Germany and Ulm Cathedral.

When Erik asked me how I knew so much, as if from personal experience, and why I got Stella’s joke about currywurst, I had to answer that I lived in Germany for a while – well, not exactly

lived – but survived, moving from place to place – hitchhiking from Vienna to the Netherlands.

I said all this in German, jokingly, and then added that I was actually from Austria, and so I had to see a lot to live their American dream.

The stranger looked at me strangely at that moment – as she did every time I managed to surprise her with something.

“Considering we have an Austrian last name, it seems symbolic,” Stella said thoughtfully, also in German, smiling timidly.

My jaw felt pulled toward the floor, and I involuntarily opened my mouth in amazement.

“Her last name,” Erik clarified, now in English, half-jokingly pointing a finger at his wife. “Our last name is hers.”

“What is it?” I breathed, curiosity overcoming the urge to go with the flow, not asking too many questions.

And anyway – I know, of course, that taking his wife’s last name is also possible, but more often than not, it’s the other way around ... But that’s none of my business.

“Reichenberg,” the stranger replied. “And in Germany it would have been von Reichenberg – since we’re talking about them.”

She chuckled, but I didn’t quite get the ‘von’ part, looking confusedly at the woman in front of me.

“Austrian titles were abolished at the beginning of the last century, and now I’m not the countess,” she explained with

a chuckle, and, annoyed at my own slowness, I nodded eagerly. “And what’s your last name?”

“Myer. I don’t think that’s my parents’ last name: I grew up in an orphanage, and they gave everyone random names there,” I shrugged, noticing that strange, but now sad, look again.

Just don’t feel sorry for me!

Yes, some are born a countess, albeit without the title, while others, like me, make do with a simple and common name.

Then dinner was brought, and the conversation moved in a different direction, leaving behind questions of family names and pasts. I enjoyed the company, eating ribeye with grilled vegetables and listening to Erik’s fascinating stories about Asian culture and, in particular, its vibrant national music.

“This is a completely different paradigm – it’s no wonder that quarter-tone melodies seem like something wild to European ears,” he reasoned.

I, in turn, tried to imagine half of a half tone, based on the information received this afternoon, and quite quickly understood what the peculiarity was that he spoke of.

“Yep, but this paradigm has just as many fans as the underground.” Stella cut off a piece of steak, but her hand never quite made it to her mouth, frozen with the fork suspended. “One of them told me, ‘Your Bach killed music with his equal-tempered piano!’ The one who plays a fretless guitar the size of a ukulele and smokes some kind of stinking weed.”

Erik laughed, taking a sip of wine.

“I’ve been advising you to change your social circle for a long time,” he said, probably alluding to those very devils whose creativity so irritated the head of the family.

By the way, as Stella mentioned earlier, two of them have academic training – one is a professional cellist, the other a pianist, and also has a qualification in sound engineering. But Erik was apparently judging by the way they chose to present their skills.

I couldn’t say anything to justify either side of the argument – I sympathized with heavy music, even if I knew a limited number of genres and artists; I didn’t have, like today’s youth, a music library on my phone and unlimited access to everything the World Wide Web offers.

I’ll have to ask Stella to let me hear what her devils are playing.

The rest of the evening went flawlessly: we chatted, smiled, and exchanged lines that, while meaningless, nevertheless determined the interaction. I relaxed and was myself, completely forgetting all my backstory; they seemed to see *me*, too – the real me, not at all disgusting.

And from the soft look that the stranger gave me every now and then, I was ready to become even better.

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